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INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000126

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [KMCA](#) [EPET](#) [GA](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PRESIDENT JAMMEH'S SPEECH TO NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY

REF: A. BANJUL 101

[1](#)B. BANJUL 124

[1](#)C. BANJUL 81 AND PREVIOUS (ALL NOTAL)

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Classified By: Ambassador Joseph Stafford, reason 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) An unusually subdued President Jammeh delivered his annual address March 2 marking the National Assembly's opening session for 2007. Providing a broad overview of GOTG actions in 2006 and plans for 2007, he highlighted the GOTG's getting back on track with the IMF, while omitting any mention of the disarray in the strategic groundnut sector. Jammeh spoke of preparations by Canadian firm, Buried Hill Energy, to begin exploratory drilling for oil and indicated that the GOTG was reviewing applications for exploration licenses submitted by other firms. Discussing the GOTG's public health programs, he made no mention of his personal treatment of HIV/AIDS and asthma patients. Jammeh refrained from his familiar anti-Western diatribes, but did weave in an implicit swipe at the West via his assertion that the GOTG's relations with other countries were guided by the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs." Jammeh's speech was most notable for its omissions, and his failure to refer to his self-proclaimed healing powers may presage an easing up on his initiative. END SUMMARY

OPENING OF NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION

[1](#)2. (SBU) On March 2, President Yahya Jammeh delivered his customary address to the National Assembly to mark the opening of its 2007 session. His 45-minute speech was considerably shorter than in previous years, and was largely devoid of the bombast, harangues, and attacks on the opposition and media often found in the volatile leader's utterances. Voicing the overall theme of the GOTG's commitment to the country's development, Jammeh reviewed the government's economic, social, and other portfolios one by one, providing a predictably upbeat overview of the government's actions in 2006 and plans for 2007.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

[1](#)3. (SBU) Discussing the Gambian economy, Jammeh assessed the agricultural sector as performing "reasonably well" in 2006, citing increased production of cereals and the traditional cash crop, groundnuts -- while avoiding any mention of the disarray in groundnut marketing efforts in recent years. He

went on to speak of GOTG's efforts to promote tourism -- the country's leading source of foreign exchange -- and boost the telecommunications sector, repeating his familiar pledge to transform The Gambia into a "Silicon Valley." Jammeh expressed satisfaction with the IMF's recent approval of a new PRGF for The Gambia (ref a), while pledging further liberalization of the trade and investment environment. He described at length the GOTG's efforts to expand the country's electrical grid as well as water supplies, particularly in rural areas.

¶4. (SBU) Turning to oil, he noted preparations for exploratory drilling here by the Canadian firm, Buried Hill Energy, the sole firm so far to have obtained a petroleum exploration license. Jammeh stated that the GOTG was reviewing applications for exploration licenses submitted by other (unnamed) foreign firms and that the GOTG would encourage oil exploration onshore as well as in the currently demarcated offshore areas. He spoke of proposing amendments to the Petroleum Act of 2004 designed to encourage foreign investment in the country's oil sector. (COMMENT: Details on these amendments are scarce; according to local media reports, the measures were subsequently approved by the National Assembly, and we gather they provide for additional incentives to firms willing to obtain oil exploration licenses. END COMMENT)

SOCIAL POLICY

¶5. (SBU) Jammeh's discussion of the GOTG's public health programs was most noteworthy for his failure to mention his own initiative to treat HIV/AIDS and asthma patients (ref b). On education, he highlighted, inter alia, the ongoing development of The Gambia's sole university, established a few years ago as well the GOTG's success in establishing male-female parity in enrollment among primary-level students.

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DEFENSE, INTERNAL SECURITY, AND FOREIGN POLICY

¶6. (SBU) Jammeh spoke of The Gambia's enjoying "peace and stability in the midst of social upheavals within the sub-region and beyond," saying the GOTG was determined to expand the capabilities of its security and military forces to ensure the maintenance of internal security and order. He reaffirmed the GOTG's commitment to providing forces for foreign peacekeeping operations.

¶7. (SBU) Jammeh refrained from his usual accusations of a hypocritical West alternately exploiting and neglecting Africa. However, he did weave in an implicit anti-Western theme with his assertions that The Gambia's relations with another country would be based on, inter alia, "non-interference in the internal affairs of each other" and that "nobody, no power will impose his political will or ideology on The Gambia." Jammeh identified promotion of African solidarity and South-South cooperation as among key Gambian foreign policy objectives. He made no mention of The Gambia's evolving relationship with Iran (ref c).

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Jammeh's speech was most notable for its omissions, e.g., regarding his HIV/AIDS treatment program, and its perfunctory quality was in sharp contrast to his National Assembly address last year, when he frequently departed from the prepared text to deliver anti-Western outbursts. This time, he rarely departed from the text and gave the impression of lacking enthusiasm in reciting a list of GOTG actions and plans in the various fields that was notably short on specifics. Like us, our contacts are at a loss to

explain the mercurial Jammeh's relatively subdued behavior on this occasion, beyond observing that his failure to mention his HIV/AIDS and asthma treatment programs may indicate his easing up on his medical initiative amidst rumors of patients' deteriorating health and possibly death (ref b).
END COMMENT
STAFFORD